

# A musician speaks: An interview with Ben Opie

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Ben Opie is a Melbourne-based oboist with a diverse and eclectic career performing across the entire repertoire for oboe. He has performed in Europe, the Middle East, North America and Australia as a soloist, collaborator and an orchestral musician. His work across the globe has earned him multiple awards and recognitions in music.

As a leader in his field, Ben regularly tutors students from the Australian Youth Orchestra and Melbourne Youth Music, and presents masterclasses at the Australian National University. With Melissa Doecke and their Inventi Ensemble, Ben presents a broad program encompassing, monthly community chamber music series in Melbourne's outer East; twice weekly interactive music workshops in detention centres; concerts and festival performances around Australia, and community-focused music workshops.

Louise Godwin recently spoke to Ben about his experience running music workshops in detention centres. The following interview forms part of their bigger conversation about the skills, attributes and competencies musicians need to connect with communities through music making.

## **What was your motivation to make music for people seeking asylum in Australia?**

It all came out of the fact that a friend and I both had one of these little moments. I was practicing at home on my own and just thinking, "Gosh. Why am I practicing at home when I could be playing with someone else? Whether it be in a prison, or a hospital or a center somewhere in the community. Surely there is somewhere I can offer the skills that

I've spent so many years refining and honing." At the time, I wasn't thinking about whether it would be interactive, then it happened really quickly. I contacted the detention centre and said, "I've got some friends who would be interested in coming in to play some music. Would you be interested in a concert for the detainees?" I then met with the program coordinator who said "We really want something more long term. Would you be interested in coming in once a month to do something?"

The first time that we went in, the staff had pulled some drums out of the storage lockers. We started playing music and the people just grabbed the drums and started playing along. From that moment on we realized, "OK, well it's not going to be us playing to them kind of thing, it's going to be an interactive thing." We were asked to come in twice a month, and then once a week in two different centres. So it was all escalating very, very quickly. It was a very steep learning curve, having to think on your feet every single second that you're in and out of there.

## **How are these workshops with detainees different to your community outreach work in schools and other communities?**

These workshops are unique because you never get the same group of people. Sometimes you have people who have been there for a couple of years, so you need to cater to them so that they are still stimulated. You can't just bring the same program in every week, like you would with, for example, a school incursion. With this, you've got a mix of people who've been there a very long

time, and others who are only staying briefly and are in a really dire situation. So you want to be able to give them some peace, some stimulation and inspiration, and just some music.

We worked really hard to find a curriculum that would work with this demographic. We wanted a mix with meditation, for lack of a better word, in which people could actively listen, but not necessarily play with us. We noticed that there were a lot of people who would sit at the back, close their eyes and listen to the music for an hour. But then there were other people who would come in and, if you put your instrument down for a second, they would grab it and want to play it. So we were thinking “How many different instruments can we bring in? What different instruments can we bring? What can we bring in, and at what level?”

### **What were some of the challenges of the sessions?**

As classically trained musicians, we work on a recital program for a month or two or whatever and that’s all we’re working towards. This one date when you get to the performance, and you perform the repertoire that you’ve prepared, then everyone applauds, then you go home, and then you can say, “Tick, good job, well done.” Whereas in the center, it didn’t matter what you had prepared because we weren’t the number one focus. The focus was on the people who were in there.

Despite our efforts to prepare them, I think some musicians were scared off because they weren’t prepared to be as spontaneous as the program needed them to be. Sometimes we’d go in and play and the room would get rowdy. We might have around twenty people in this tiny room with djembes and sticks and clapping and sometimes they would just sing as loud as they could, or they would scream and yell as part of the music. I felt that part of our obligation was to be able to give them a release. What a great release for them to be able to be listening to music in a real, energetic way, and sing, scream or whatever. This was also confronting for a lot of the musicians, including myself

sometimes, but I find it hard not to encourage that kind of behavior. I’d see people dancing to Fauré and dancing to our improvised jams and stuff, and would find it really hard to tell them to stop expressing themselves in that way.

### **How did you approach developing the workshop program, particularly when you knew so little about the participants and their stories?**

We had two strategies for dealing with that. One of them was, it’s OK. It’s OK to be ignorant and it’s OK to not know what this person has gone through and also it is OK not to ask them. While there were many weeks and months of plateauing in terms of the program development because we all just felt so stuck, we would remember “It’s OK if your activity doesn’t work, if the whole session doesn’t work”.

I think that’s part of where we are at the moment, in my perception of the world. It feels like every single performance, every single activity that you do, every classroom that you go into, everything has to be moving forward to the next level, every single time. And so your performance has to be perfect, so that you then go onto the next performance which is even more perfect. And then when you’re teaching it has to be the same thing. So what I was trying to encourage was the notion that it’s OK that each of the sessions doesn’t take people to some heightened level. Great if it does, but if it doesn’t, let’s not beat ourselves up about it.

The other strategy was inspired by one of the musicians who started relatively recently. He would just go in, unapologetically, and talk. Where I was focusing on what I could offer them musically — because we were going in there to do music sessions — he was going in with the number one priority of talking to these people. Letting them know, yeah, I’m a musician, but I want to get to know you. And you’re human, and we’re all human and let’s be humans together.

## **What skills did you find you need for the workshops?**

We weren't necessarily community music musicians. We weren't even classroom musicians and all of a sudden we were dealing with a large group of people and having to, in some ways, control the environment for an hour. This is a skill that does get taught and can be learned but it was just that some of us didn't have those skills. This was really difficult. Not everyone wanted to step into the role of group leader, and sometimes I didn't want to either, but it was often down to me in the end to say "OK now we're going to move on to the next thing." Within the group of musicians, although no one wanted to be a leader, we're all very creative, and sometimes it was hard to tell someone "no".

One of the trickiest things was having a bank of resources that we could, literally, pull out of the bag. One of the best things that we ended up doing were these cup songs where we just had a bag of plastic cups that we brought with us and then you turn the cups into percussion instruments.

## **How did you build relationships and trust with the people who attended the workshops?**

Trust was really, really hard because these people came to the workshops with no trust. So building trust through activities like body percussion or clapping songs was a really big challenge. And then accidentally, obviously accidentally, breaking that trust.

There was one time we chose a cup song. We hadn't realised that a lot of these songs are about freedom, having freedom and missing your loved ones. Sometimes an inspiring song from our perspective is just heartbreaking for someone else. And we came in with this song. It was just one of those cup songs about missing someone and then it went through and described the things that ... what was it ... I'm going to miss you when you're gone. I'm going to miss your hair. I'll miss you everywhere or something. And one lady just burst into tears halfway

through the song and she got really angry and said, "Why would you make me sing this? This is so hard for me." And then I blamed myself for not realising that that might have been a sensitive thing. All I wanted to do was have a great activity with a good song and a good melody attached to it.

## **Do you think that having a philosophical framework would help when doing intercultural work?**

Yes. The number of times that I'm sure we made huge cultural faux pas. We assumed something about someone because of the place that they're from. I hate that those things happen, but then how do you get around it? We don't want to be culturally insensitive, but if we were so scared of being culturally insensitive, we probably wouldn't even be in there, or we'd sit in there and we wouldn't talk to them at all, and we'd say "we're going to play Western classical music to you now". I think that's part of the philosophy. Perhaps it's being culturally ignorant, which then potentially leads to accidental cultural insensitivity. And how best to deal with that? And then that comes back to this idea of trust in the people in the workshops.

## **How much can be taught to help people prepare for this sort of work?**

Maybe it is less about whether things can be taught and more just around flagging things to be aware of before you go in so that it doesn't feel like a truck hitting you in the face when it inevitably happens.

## **What do you wish you'd known before going into the detention centres?**

I just wish that someone had flagged with me that, for these workshops, everyone wants to do the right thing. New people would say "I've got great intentions in doing these workshops" and then I would have to say "Here's how it is. You're not going to go in and play music and then have everyone come up and hug you afterwards and say what a beautiful musician you are and be so grateful for

the music that you've provided them. There will be people who will do that, but you will also have other people who might swear at you, or walk out during your performance of whatever it is you think is the most beautiful thing in the history of time, or you'll get people saying that the music you are playing is terrible."

I think another aspect is that on top of not knowing who is going to be there when you turn up, you also don't know who's not going to be there. These friends that you've made, that you see every single week for a year maybe are all of a sudden deported over night.

I had to take a step back because it just got emotional, too taxing for me and I had to remove myself for a little while. It was really tricky, and I think that everyone there had similar experiences.

It's been a joy to be able to have this work as part of my life, but no one ever said, like, "Watch out. It'll hurt". A friend who is a music therapist said to me "You know it's a real thing, this trauma that you're experiencing. It's a real thing and you need to look after yourself".

### **Do you have examples of people you feel are particularly good at this work?**

When we were looking for more resources and ways of doing things, I actually went and sat in on one of Jonathon Welch sessions with his choir. I find him very inspiring, and someone who is able to teach a lot of really good strategies and techniques on leadership and working with groups. He walks in and immediately commands the room. In the whole time that we did these sessions I think there were maybe, five or so people who really had the charisma to be able to walk into a group of completely unknown people—people who didn't even necessarily want to be there—and command the attention and respect of everyone. And I do think that this is something that can be taught.

### **Can you name the key characteristics common to these individuals with the charisma?**

Confidence in public speaking, having resources to draw upon, and assuredness in ones own musical skills, which is not about your talent. Either you need to be completely happy and confident with your skills on your instrument or you need to not care about how good you are. It's more about what you can do in the workshops.

Some weeks I would go in with no confidence because it had been sapped out of me during the week for various other reasons. Another time I'd have the confidence but maybe not the resources because I hadn't had time to get the resources. Assuredness of ability was something I could always rely on. The ability to say "OK guys, I'm going to play now" was something that I always knew that I could fall back on. Maybe bravery as well. I didn't really care if things went wrong.

### **So how important are aural and improvisatory skills?**

It's less about needing the aural or improvisatory skills, although it's ideal to have them, but it all comes back to bravery. To have a go, have a laugh at yourself if it doesn't work, and then, again, build some trust with the people that you're playing with.

### **Has the experience changed the way you think about music-making?**

I've been doing some junk instrument making things, and some work with Vision Australia members as well, and it all ends up being, for me, this idea that wherever you are it is possible to make music and express yourself even if it's through something like a plastic cup. This has ended up being a sort of catch call for me, whether talking to the musicians in the program, or talking to workshop participants or even when I went to Broken Hill recently and talked to the local community about what music-making they can do. You don't need thousands of dollars' worth of ukuleles and recorders. Although that would be

great, you can do it with plastic cups just to start with, and then build from there.

Coming back to the question of what gets taught. I was taught from an early age that you need a good instrument so that you can express yourself as well as you need to, and that's true for the concert recital repertoire that I play. It's true. I need a good oboe to play on so that I can do all the things that I do. But at a community and grassroots level, it would be great if we said to people, all you need is something to express. And then you can find the tools to express yourself around you. Whether it's plastic cups or body percussion or singing or ...

**Louise Godwin** is a PhD candidate in the School of Education at RMIT University. She has a Master of Education (Research) from RMIT University, and a Bachelor of Music (Hons) from The University of Melbourne. She has taught cello and piano in primary schools in Melbourne, has held program coordination roles within tertiary music institutions, and has worked in artist, project, event and concert management in community music and professional performing arts sectors. Louise is involved in the traditional music community and performs as a cellist and occasional fiddler.